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NOTE OF A CONVERSATION BETWEEN THE PRIME MINISTER AND THE
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE AT 10 DOWNING STREET ON
20 FEBRUARY 1978

(The Prime Minister had asked the Defence Secretary to call on him to discuss the paper by the Chiefs of Staff, forwarded to the Prime Minister under cover of Mr. Mulley's minute of 16 January, on "Response to the Soviet Threat to Targets in the UK".)

The Prime Minister said that he would like to have a clearer idea of how the NATO defence system actually went into operation. He had noted, for example, that according to the Chiefs of Staff paper, 200 Soviet bombers would be confronted by only 100 UK fighters with sufficient ammunition for only two to three days' operations. Against this background, what would be the sequence of events if the Soviet Union did in fact try to knock out the UK first before taking on the rest of NATO? How would the collective NATO response manifest itself? Mr. Mulley said that in this situation General Haig would divert aircraft which were deployed on the Continent. The new Soviet "Backfire" bomber was the main problem. The Prime Minister asked whether there was a definite NATO contingency plan on how the Alliance would respond in the situation which he had outlined. Mr. Mulley said that there was no plan to transfer NATO aircraft to stations in the UK; but in practice American aircraft would be diverted from other operations.

The Prime Minister asked Mr. Mulley whether this lack of certainty and definition did not cause him concern? Mr. Mulley replied that in his view it all went back to the 1965 Defence Review, which had been crazy. The RAF, for example, was suffering from an acute manpower shortage. The new air defence version of the Tornado aircraft would not come into operation until 1985 (the FRG and Italy were ordering only the strike version, which would be available earlier).

/The Prime Minister

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The Prime Minister asked Mr. Mulley about the general expectation of the probable nature of the next war. Mr. Mulley said that any Soviet attack would probably follow a period of tension; it would not come out of the blue. It might result from situations such as had arisen in the past in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Ultimately, responsibility within the Alliance for knocking out the Russian nuclear capacity lay with the United States. The Prime Minister asked whether Mr. Mulley therefore saw no prospect of a semi-conventional war, involving tactical nuclear weapons, but nothing larger; and with a major role for conventional, rather than nuclear, aerial bombardment. He asked where the Soviet Union's tactical weapons were sited. Mr. Mulley said that they were mostly in the Western Soviet Union. The Prime Minister asked whether the Soviet Union had an equivalent to the Jaguar aircraft. Mr. Mulley said that the Russians did have an equivalent, mostly stationed in the GDR. Mr. Mulley went on to say that the Soviet Union had just introduced the new SS20 missile, whose natural targets were France and the FRG. This was a highly mobile missile which made it difficult to knock out.

The Prime Minister asked whether he should conclude from Mr. Mulley's remarks that he had been talking about a scenario which was not in fact likely to happen. Mr. Mulley confirmed this. The Prime Minister asked whether UK Phantom and Lightning fighters were capable of taking on the Soviet Backfire bomber. Mr. Mulley said that they were. The Backfire bombers, however, would probably fly very low en route to the UK, thereby beating our radar warning systems. Against this, we were improving our radar coverage through the Nimrod flying radar system; and we were also developing the capacity to refuel fighter aircraft in the air. The Nimrods would be in operation by 1982.

The Prime Minister asked what would happen when a Nimrod detected a Backfire attack. Mr. Mulley said that the first step would be to send up Phantom fighters to intercept them. But they were short of ammunition and could operate, as the paper pointed out, for only two to three days. The Prime Minister asked why we were in this situation; it seemed to him a scandal. Mr. Mulley agreed and said that in his view the Phantoms should have ammunition for at least six days' operation.

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Prime Minister

You asked for his assessment.

*SW
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*Has been
1221 file to
tell to Mr Mulley
about this -*

PRIME MINISTER

DEFENCE AGAINST THE SOVIET THREAT TO THE
UNITED KINGDOM

When you read the paper JIC(77)10 about the direct Soviet threat to the United Kingdom you asked what capability we had to meet it. I attach, as requested, a note by the Chiefs of Staff.

2. To get matters into perspective one must recognise that our main protection comes from collective overall deterrence. Even the United States relies on this. The Soviet Union faces an Alliance, not the UK in isolation; and it faces moreover a military capability running right up to the strategic nuclear level.

3. Nevertheless, the picture the Chiefs of Staff set out is a sobering one. Britain is a far nearer and more concentrated target than the US and is the hinge of the Alliance's response to any major aggression. It ought not to be left easily open to conventional attack, and its direct protection is indeed one of the four main "concentration" areas of our defence effort; yet the note shows that our current capability to protect it is uncomfortably thin. I do not think our posture reflects any seriously mistaken assessment of defence priorities, but we should be aware of the realities of our position. I intend to consider with the Chiefs of Staff whether

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there is anything more we can do, within current resources and priorities, to improve it.

4. I am sending copies to our colleagues on DOP and to Sir John Hunt.

Fm.

16th January 1978

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RESPONSE TO THE SOVIET THREAT TO TARGETS IN THE UKPART I - SUMMARY

1. The Soviet conventional threat to the UK and its approaches embraces attack from the air by aircraft with free fall or stand-off weapons, and submarine launched cruise missiles; submarine and mining activity against NATO shipping and sea-borne reinforcements; and clandestine and Warsaw Pact Special Force operations on land. The nuclear threat is from ballistic missiles and from aircraft using free-fall bombs and stand-off missiles. There is also a chemical threat.
2. Defence of the UK against Soviet aggression would form part of a cohesive effort by the NATO alliance which recognises that aggression against one member constitutes an attack on the alliance as a whole. The effectiveness of our defences is critically dependent on NATO collectively making the maximum use of available warning time to bring in-place forces to full readiness and begin the process of reinforcement.
3. NATO strategy is one of deterrence and flexible response which does not necessarily require us to have a capacity for successful defence at every level. However, there is a need for a credible conventional capability to respond appropriately or deterrence is weakened, and the need for early recourse to nuclear weapons has to be faced.
4. Because of limitations in defence expenditure over a long period, front-line and logistic elements are frequently concentrated by function and in unhardened positions. Command and control facilities are also largely unhardened. Although some geographical dispersal would occur on transition to war, defence facilities in the UK are vulnerable.

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5. UK forces cannot match the threat postulated by the JIC assessment (1). Air defences would be outweighed because aircraft would be outnumbered and stocks of air defence munitions would sustain operations for only two or three days. Maritime forces need better anti-submarine weapons, and face a massive threat from submarine and air-launched missiles and also from mines; the most serious deficiency is in numbers. The Army in UK would, until mobilisation is complete, have insufficient forces to meet its commitments; after mobilisation of the reserves, a process taking between 15-20 days (mobilisation to mainland Europe takes 10 days), the Army would be able to counter the currently assessed Soviet land threat during the initial stages of war but, lacking supporting arms and logistic support, it would be inadequate to deal with any more significant threat, including sabotage or subversion on a wide scale.

6. In the case of nuclear attack by ballistic missiles there would be no defensive capability, save the indirect defence of our nuclear forces. Effective air defence against aircraft-launched nuclear weapons would also be extremely difficult. However, the main focus would by then have moved to the use of our own strategic and tactical nuclear resources.

7. Defence against chemical attack is limited largely to personal protective measures for a proportion of Servicemen.

8. Improvements presently planned will enhance the quality of UK defences but Soviet forces will also be improved in quality as well as quantity over the same period. As a result, UK defences are likely to be as thin in the future as they are now; and, if present

Note:

1. JIC(77) 10 dated 24 October 1977.

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divergent trends in Soviet and UK defence capability continue,
the situation could only deteriorate further. W

9. Given even the maximum use of warning time, it is unlikely that the UK defences could prevent the loss of a substantial proportion of NATO's forces based in the UK, including important US assets, which would significantly reduce NATO's ability to sustain conventional operations successfully in Europe, in the Eastern Atlantic and in the Channel Areas.

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PART II - MAIN ASSESSMENTRESPONSE TO THE SOVIET THREAT TO TARGETS IN THE UKBACKGROUND

1. A recent JIC Report (1) assessed the Soviet capability to attack targets in the UK as part of general aggression against NATO when the Soviet Union had completed full war preparations. The Prime Minister subsequently called (2) for an assessment of how UK/NATO forces would defend UK targets against the assessed threat.

AIM

2. To assess the capacity to defend targets in the UK Base against the Soviet threat. Civil defence is not considered.

GENERAL STRATEGY

3. Our principal military safeguard lies in NATO's collective capability to deter aggression of all kinds, by making it clear that an aggressor would be involved in disproportionate risks. Deterrence does not require a capacity for successful, self-contained direct defence at every level but rather the ability to respond in an appropriate manner to any form of aggression and convey the threat of escalation to a higher level. The UK, as an independent nuclear power and host nation to large and powerful US forces, would pose a serious problem to the Soviet Union if it were contemplating an attack.

4. Deterrence and defence is based on the NATO Treaty provision that aggression against one member constitutes an attack on the alliance as a whole. However, defence of the UK base, Eastern Atlantic and Channel Areas is largely a British responsibility.

Notes:

1. JIC(77)10 dated 24 October 1977
2. Letter from 10 Downing Street dated 21 November 1977.

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Moreover, the UK is crucial to NATO strategy as a marshalling and transit area for transatlantic reinforcements, a base for maritime forces controlling the Eastern Atlantic and keeping open the shipping lanes, and as a base for SACEUR's operations. The loss of a substantial proportion of NATO's forces based in the UK would significantly reduce NATO's ability to sustain conventional operations successfully in Europe, the Eastern Atlantic and the Channel Areas, and thus increase the risk of the need to resort to early use of nuclear weapons.

DEFENCE AGAINST CONVENTIONAL THREAT

The Conventional Threat

5. The most immediate Soviet conventional threat is from heavy and medium bombers, and long range tactical aircraft (which have many times the capacity, accuracy and effectiveness of the Germans at their peak in World War II). Also serious is the threat against shipping and shore targets from attack/cruise missile submarines, and the mining of ports and sea approaches, clandestinely or by air. At an early stage clandestine operations within UK might be mounted by the Diversionary Brigade Special Forces and by saboteurs.
6. Likely targets for Soviet attack on the UK base in conventional war are assessed (1) as:

- a. All nuclear strike forces and nuclear delivery systems.
- b. Other facilities, including command and control installations, associated with British and American nuclear forces.
- c. Air defence facilities.
- d. Maritime forces and reinforcements being moved to and from the UK.

Note:

1. JIC(77)10 dated 24 October 1977.

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In addition there would be the conventional offensive support forces based in UK and reinforcements moving to and from this country by air.

General Concept of Operations

7. The effectiveness of NATO's defences depends critically on NATO nations collectively making best use of available warning time to bring in-place forces to full readiness and to initiate reinforcement. UK defence resources would be dispersed as much as possible during the transition to war phase but would still be vulnerable because the options for deployment have been reduced as a result of defence cuts over some years. Unavoidable concentration of front-line and logistic resources by function, and the fact that command and control facilities are largely unhardened, contribute to the degree of vulnerability. In subsequent paragraphs we examine how our forces, in concert with those of our allies, would meet the conventional threat in the initial stages.

Countering the Air Threat

8. By virtue of its geographical position, the UK would benefit from any attrition that other NATO forces might inflict on Soviet air forces en route to attack targets in the UK, but a substantial weight of attack directed at the UK is likely to remain. If Soviet land forces made a major advance large numbers of fighter bombers could also be deployed within range of UK.

9. Against a threat of more than 200 Soviet bombers we have a front-line strength of less than 100 fighters together with very limited area coverage of surface-to-air missiles. Although the fighters could acquit themselves well, they have sufficient missiles for only two to three days operations. The numbers of surface-to-air missiles in the UK and afloat are also inadequate; there are only enough Bloodhounds, which cover 15 key RAF and US airfields,

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for a single reload. Air defence relies upon a largely unhardened radar ground environment, supplemented by information from continental radars and a single squadron of obsolete airborne early warning aircraft. Much of the command and control system is unhardened, insecure and vulnerable to sabotage and jamming. As yet there are no hardened shelters for aircraft, although the USAF have started to provide this protection for their aircraft in the UK. It is evident that concentration of the Soviet air effort in space and time would be difficult to contain.

10. Improvements in UK air defence capability are planned, but Shackleton AEW will not be replaced by Nimrod, and the Lightnings and Phantoms by Tornado, until the mid 1980s. Stocks of air-to-air missiles will not be built up until 1983, and improved ground environment and hardened shelters for our fighters will not be available until later. However, by this time it must be expected that the Soviet capability will have developed further both in quality and quantity, so that the overall position cannot be expected to improve.

Countering the Maritime Threat

11. The forces with which the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force would counter the initial threat would be largely, but not exclusively, anti-submarine. They would operate in concert with allied forces. In general, as far as quality is concerned, UK forces are well equipped to meet this threat although anti-submarine operations in the shallow waters surrounding UK would be difficult and there is a need for better anti-submarine weapons. But even taking into account allied resources, our most serious deficiency is in numbers. Our maritime resources would be spread very thinly in the Eastern Atlantic Areas and the threat they would face is

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massive. The amount we could afford to assign to submarines directly threatening the UK base would be limited. Overall we could expect to destroy only a proportion of the submarines which threaten us. There are no port or coastal defences against cruise missile attacks and much would also depend on the time available to send ships to sea before they are attacked in port.

12. It is a national responsibility to deal with Soviet mining of ports and approaches but national resources fail to match the assessed threat. The Royal Navy's mine countermeasures vessels would have as their first priority keeping open the approaches to the nuclear submarine base at Faslane; after this, insufficient resources would remain to deal adequately with the tasks of clearing cross channel routes and providing safe access to our major ports.

13. There is a constant programme of improvements planned for UK maritime forces which will enable us better to match the threat, but even if sufficient resources were made available it would be some years before the present deficiencies could be made good. For the present, economic constraints, which limit expenditure on training resources such as missiles and aircraft, adversely affect readiness and hence the deterrent effect of alliance maritime forces.

Countering the Land Threat

14. Land operations in the UK would be based on the provision of guards for essential Key Points installations, which are possible targets for Soviet attack by Diversionary Brigade Special Forces and by saboteurs. Armed guards would be provided by all three Services but predominantly by the Army. The requirement for guards on Key Points before mobilisation would greatly exceed the forces available. During mobilisation,

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manpower commitments would increase and continue to outnumber the Regular and TAVR forces available. It would be only when the Reserve Army was fully effective, some 15-20 days after mobilisation, that the Key Point commitment could be fully met. Yet the sabotage threat is at its greatest immediately before, or at the outbreak of, hostilities for which we may receive as little as 48 hours warning. A call-out of reservists as early as possible would ease the situation. It would be several days after mobilisation before some Regular and TAVR units would be released from guarding Key Points to deal with the unforeseen. Moreover, Home Defence forces are mainly infantry battalions at light scales, only partially mobile, and equipped to deal with a threat posed by groups of Diversionary Brigades Special Forces and by saboteurs. They lack the supporting artillery, armour, communications and logistic support needed for operations against larger seaborne or airborne forces, whose use by the Soviet Union is not excluded during the latter stages of hostilities.

DEFENCE AGAINST NUCLEAR AND CHEMICAL THREAT

The Nuclear and Chemical Threat

15. It is assessed (1) that the Soviet Union might have available for an attack against the UK up to 150 land-based strategic nuclear missiles, each with a single warhead, and about 160 medium bombers. About 130 submarine-launched ballistic nuclear missile are available for attack on NATO Europe, of which a proportion would be targetted on the UK. By 1982 Soviet land-based missiles will be capable of attacking up to 200 targets, and the number of available medium bombers will

Note:

1. JIC(77)10 dated 24 October 1977.

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increase to nearly 200. The likely targets are assessed (1) as being:

- a. Allied nuclear strike capability, including associated facilities.
- b. Centres of political administration and major cities.
- c. Command and control and air defence centres, radars, and airfields, and seabed surveillance systems.
- d. Naval bases, ports and facilities associated with the movement of reinforcements.

16. The JIC paper mentions the considerable capacity of the Soviet Union for mounting chemical warfare and warns that it would be imprudent to ignore the possibility of such an attack on the UK. Present defence is limited. Although most servicemen possess respirators only some have protective suits. Steps are in hand to increase the number of suits on a limited scale. Airfields in the UK are not hardened against chemical attack and only a few headquarters have any built-in protection.

Nuclear Strike

17. The UK has no defensive capability against nuclear ballistic missile attack save the indirect defence of a nuclear response. Resources would as far as possible be dispersed on transition to war and the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (if it had survived the conventional phase) would provide short but sufficient warning of a ballistic missile attack to enable aircraft to take off for survival or retaliatory strike.

18. Attrition during a conventional phase would reduce the air defence resources available to face an attack by aircraft carrying nuclear weapons. Such effort as survived would face the difficulties of operating from a radiation-contaminated environment against an

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1. JIC(77)10 dated 24 October 1977.

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enemy who could use powerful nuclear stand-off weapons launched at up to 350 nautical miles from their targets. In these circumstances it would be very difficult to sustain effective air defence.

IMPLICATIONS

19. The implications of this assessment are:

a. If deterrence failed, the defence of the UK would be critically dependent upon NATO making the maximum use of available warning time to bring all forces to full readiness and to begin reinforcement prior to war.

b. Given even the maximum readiness of NATO forces, it is doubtful if the defences of the UK would be sufficient, even against only conventional attack, to prevent vital elements of NATO's military capability being substantially damaged or destroyed.

c. The early loss of substantial NATO forces based in or transitting through the UK could force rapid escalation to the nuclear level and greatly reduce the time available for political resolution of the conflict.

20. The weaknesses described above will remain throughout the period covered by the JIC assessment. If present trends in Soviet and NATO capability continue, the gap will widen between the forces available to attack the UK and our ability to defend effectively against them.

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